

A BLOODLESS REVOLUTION, BUT WITH LOTS OF GUTS!

Gram Vikas Building Support team, Mohuda, Ganjam

Gram Vikas Building Support Team is engaged in the promotion of livelihoods in construction sector in Orissa. It trains unskilled men and women in construction trades like masonry, carpentry, wire bending etc. Gram Vikas also promotes the use of cost-effective, energy-efficient and environment-friendly (CEEF) construction technologies. These technologies are applied in diverse contexts - housing for the rural poor, sanitation, infrastructure and water supply systems in villages, cyclone shelters as well as public buildings like schools.

This story is an account of an Australian Volunteer's experience with the women mason's training programme conducted by Gram Vikas Building Support Team. Kylie McEvoy worked with Gram Vikas for more than two years in the Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Documentation division.

Was it really just one and a half years ago ?

It does not seem even that long since I was interviewing one of the first groups of trainee women masons. I remember being impressed with Shashi Nahak's statement about how she and the other women braved ridicule, to be the first in their village to join the training programme.

I was impressed, but still I had reservations. As they talked doubts began to form in the back of my mind... was this really going to work ? What was worrying me most were statements like 'things are better for us now, but what we are doing is still not fully accepted". Where was this programme going when the women were adamant "we will not have an opportunity to take up work outside our village if it requires us to be absent overnight... this would not be acceptable to our families or the community'. Gram Vikas could not supply work locally forever, so what was going to happen then?

I tried raising this point with the women, but they did not want to face it, and replied with great certainty that Gram Vikas would just have to keep employing them at Mohuda and that was all there was to it.

I went away reminding myself that change does not happen all at once and something like this would take time. I meant that in this area there were many women who remained behind closed doors, not able to mix in public places for fear that it would shame their families. The first positive step was the women agreeing to join the programme.. the next sign that change was really on the way came soon after, when the women used their income to buy bicycles and learnt how to ride. One

day you passed a group of women scurrying along the road on foot so as not to be late for work, their tiffin carriers in hand or on head, while men swished by on bicycles. The next thing you knew, you could see groups of women brightly clad in their saris hurtling confidently towards you on their new bicycles, sometimes even giving the men a lift on the back.

This development had a great impact on other women in their villages. Women, who had worked as labour for Gram Vikas for many years, saw these young masons and their cycles and the next thing you knew, they too had brought cycles and rode to work. A precedent had been set and the wheels were turning.

Then last night, I learned something that made me really smile. A group of women from Tamana had agreed to go and work 15 km away on a site in Berhampur. Gram Vikas organised accommodation for them and their stay together, away from home. Now these same women, who are much in demand for their fine pointing work, have moved further afield and are working on sites in the neighbouring district of Gajapati, 100km away from their village.

It made me stop and think; an amazing thing has happened here and we have hardly noticed... it has been a bloodless revolution ! I wait now to see how long it will be before these women cross the final frontier and are engaged for equal wages for work outside Gram Vikas.